OH, WHEN THE SAINTS
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In Charleston, SC this summer, I visited St. Michael's Church, a magnificent old building with a spire visible from the harbour. The church has played a major role in that interesting city for several centuries. The man who was showing me around, however, kept telling me about the structure, but I kept being distracted by the many historical plaques on the walls. I am an inveterate reader of plaques. Whenever I visit an historic church, regardless of the beauty of the architecture or stained glass, the first thing I do is look for the plaques on the walls. They contain the story of the church, apart from which the physical facility is merely a monument..."To the glory of God and in memory of the Rev. so and so; Beloved Pastor Who Labored Among Us For Twenty Years; In Sacred Memory of Artillery Sergeant so and so, Army of the Confederate, Killed at Vicksburg; In Memory of Mrs. so and so, Dedicated Teacher, Lover of Children..."

I read the plaques because they, not the soaring arches and intricate carving, tell the story of the church. They contain the names of the saints, the people, the individual men and women whose faith is confirmed by the very existence of the church they once loved long ago.

Yet the more Protestant we are, the less we talk about the saints. There is a story in that and it needs telling every so often, particularly on this Sunday, Reformation Day. Actually there are three events which bear on the story: the ancient church holiday called "All Saints Day"; the eve of all saints, known in history as "All Hallows Eve", "Hallow's Eve" - or "Halloween"; and the day of All Hallow's, one day before All Saints. Today, the occasion Augustinian monk Father Martin Luther chose to nail his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg to start a Reformation.

All Saints Day was the occasion in the Middle Ages to think about the saints of the church, to revere and adore the saints in Masses for that purpose, to invoke the favor of the saints in acts of piety and devotion. But as often happened in the Middle Ages, a good idea got mixed up with superstition and economics and politics and the result was disastrous.

The dead, superstition had it, were a little nearer the world of the living on the occasion of All Saints. As they were being thought about, revered, and invoked, it was understandable that some would imagine their actual presence. In fact, if you were quiet, you might see them in the grave yard, emerging from the shadows. It was a good idea to be prepared to ward off the unwelcome spirits too, by carving a frightning face in a gourd or large squash. All Hallows Eve became a hybrid part of the feast, particularly entrancing to the young.

Martin Luther chose the day before All Saints to nail his Theses to the church door in Wittenberg because a lot of people would be passing that way the following morning. On All Saints Day the year before, 1516, Frederick the Wise's collection of sacred relics had gone on display in Wittenberg. It was very much a carnival. Roland Bainton has written the definitive work on the topic and has preserved even the contents of Frederick's collection for the record: a thorn from the crown Jesus wore, one tooth from St. Jerome, four pieces of St. Chrysostom, four hairs of the Virgin Mary, seven pieces of her veil sprinkled with the blood of Christ. The relics of Jesus included a piece of the swaddling

cloth he wore at Bethlehem, a wisp of the straw, a piece of the bread of the Last Supper, a chunk of the stone from which he ascended into heaven. One of the oldest items was a twig from Moses' burning bush. Five years later, in 1521, Frederick's collection contained 19,012 Holy Relics. The rub was, in Luther's time, that it was believed that if a Christian was fortunate enough to view all of them on All Saints Day and to make a generous contribution, he/she was granted indulgences - reductions in time to be spent in Purgatory for a maximum of 1,902,207 years and 270 days. (see Roland Bainton, Here I Stand, p. 53)

At the heart of Martin Luther's protest was the idea that the saints had accumulated so much goodness during their lives, much of it was left over, in storage as it were, available for distribution by the church, for a fee. In fact, all Luther proposed to do initially was debate the whole system of indulgences. When his protest became a full-scale revolt and Reformation, therefore, its adherents wanted little to do with anything remotely connected to the idea of indulgences. The idea of saints wes deemphasized. In the process, Western Christianity lost one of its more useful and, I think, important concepts. Most of us came of age in the Christian Church without the foggiest notion of what we were affirming when we said, in the Apostles' Creed, that we believed in the Communion of Saints.

Let's think about the idea for a minute. We value autonomy and individual independence in our culture. Too much so, some would say. We are never totally autonomous - Christianly speaking, or for that matter, in any way whatever. We are an amazingly complex amalgam of influences out of the past; visible and invisible, conscious and unconscious. We bear within us, in genetic structure a microcosm of a family at least, and the whole race at most. We are, for better or worse, positively or negatively, deeply in debt to our past: to our parents directly, but also to their parents, and their parents, and their parents. Have you ever reacted instinctively to a stimulus, and been astonished because the inflection in your voice and words you used sounded exactly like your mother or father. We are never totally autonomous.

Lutheran historian Martin Marty was lecturing at a Roman Catholic University after Vatican II: some students were cheering a blasphemously furious ex-priest who was scorning Mother Church. Marty reports, "I asked them why the applause. 'You'll never understand,' said one, 'what an identity crisis the Catholic Church gave each one of us.' I wondered aloud if they knew how lucky they were ever to have belonged to anything that was potent enough to give them an identity over which to have a crisis." (By Way of Response, p. 19)

Nikos Kazantzakis, who wrote Zorba, the Greek, reflected in another book on those who had gone before. He hears them say..."Finish our work! All day and all night we come and go through your body...When you shake with fear, your terror branches out into innumerable generations, and degrades innumerable souls before and behind you. When you rise to a valorous deed, all of your race rises with you and turns valorous..." (The Saviors of God, see E. Campbell's Notebook, Spring, 1982)

The novelist caught the deeper reality which the church has always intended in the idea of the Communion of Saints, namely, that we are not alone. We are not using mystical language. Those who have gone before us, continue to influence us - as we will influence those who come after us. Kazantzakis put it

strongly..."Your first duty," he wrote, "...is to feel within you all your ancestors. Your second duty is to throw light on their onrush and continue their work. Your third duty is to pass on to your son or daughter the great mandate to surpass you." (ibid.)

The text this morning, from the Book of Hebrews, written particularly for a people who needed to come to terms with their own past, reminds them, and us, of those who had gone before: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses..."We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses," the writer exclaimed. And we are. Surrounded by, influenced by and in the presence of a cloud of witnesses who have given us each the gift of life, poured into us the raw material of our personalities, given us whatever faith we have, the church, each other. How sad that we Protestants can't celebrate our saints, recognize them, name them, thank God for them.

To do so would mean looking deeply into our own inner-person. Psychology has taught us to be comfortable with our own internal complexity. We have become accustomed to thinking about our "shadow selves" which, we have been told, are capable of all sorts of evil. Sigmund Freud taught the world about libido and id, and suggested that beneath the surface we are all repressed desire and murderous impulse. The Freudians gave the church's idea of original sin a new lease on life. After Freud it became immanently respectable to reflect academically on St. Paul's lament that the good he willed, he did not do, but the evil he wished to avoid is exactly what he ended up doing.

The late Carlyle Marney, Southern Baptist theologian said one time that the human personality is like a house. The Freudians have shown us that each house has a cellar. In the cellar is the plumbing and the trash heap. It is where we keep those shadowy persons, or personalities. As sons and daughters of the Reformation we believe it is good to know about the cellar and who is in there. The trouble, Marney used to say, is that it has become fashionable to spend all our time there. We act as if the plumbing and trash heap are all there is to us. Instead of repenting of our sin, someone noted, the "Me Generation" wallows in it, celebrates it, and calls it "doing my own thing."

The house metaphor is a good one. But there is more to the structure of our personalities than the cellar. In fact, each of us has pretty fancy architecture if we emerge from the darkness of the cellar long enough to see it. Each of us has kitchen, library, parlour, bedroom, and a gracious balcony on the perimeter of the house. On that balcony are the people who are the strong and good and healthy influences. They have names. They are our saints.

Who are they? They are different people for all of us, and helpful exercise is to identify them. In his autobiography Frederick Buechner writes: "On All Saints Day, it is not just the saints of the church that we should remember in our prayers, but all the foolish ones and wise ones, the shy ones and overbearing ones, the broken ones and whole ones, the despots and crackpots of our lives who, one way or another, have been our particular fathers and mothers and saints, and whom we loved without knowing we loved them and by whom we were helped to whatever little we may ever hope to have of some kind of seedy sainthood of our own." (The Sacred Journey, p. 74)

An appropriate way to observe All Saints Day, I propose, is to walk out into the garden and look up at the structure of your personality. Look at the balcony which is there. Identify the people who are there: your parents, grandparents, teachers, aunts, athletic coach, friends... Name them. Wave to them. They are your saints, and to be in touch with them, to know them and to be open to their continuing influence is the best meaning I know for the Communion of Saints.

This church has a multitude of saints. They are on the balcony for us everytime we are here together. One of them died recently, Dr. J. Harry Cotton, pastor of the church from 1928 until 1940. We will observe Dr. Cotton's life and ministry in a Memorial Service this afternoon. This morning I am reminded of the occasion several years ago when he was here to preach at the funeral of his friend Katherine Hislop. Dr. Cotton said, "If I have any clarity in Christian doctrine it isn't from reading theology, but from knowing Christian people like Katherine."

We are not alone. In the natural sequence of things each of us stakes out an individual identity by declaring our independence from the past. It is a necessary part of becoming a person if we are to be more than mere physiological and psychological extensions of our parents. But we never fully succeed in separating ourselves totally. We can't and shouldn't. We are not alone. We are influenced by others. We are made to be bigger and better and healthier and stronger by the love and expectations and support of our Communion of particular saints.

In faith, we are sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and Rebekah, of Peter and Mary and Andrew and Martha, of St. Augustine and Martin Luther, and John Calvin. We are sons and daughters of Samuel Palmer and Harry Cotton and all the saints who loved this church.

Our deepest faith is that they are safe in God's care. We are, the writer of Hebrews maintained, "surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses." Each of us has a number of saints. Each of us as surrounded by a could of very particular witnesses. Reflect on that fact this day. Identify them. Look up and wave at them. Give God thanks for each of them. Amen.